

Commencement from Notre Dame in 1980

It is a joy to be able to celebrate this significant day of Commencement from the College of Notre Dame with you--graduating students, families, faculty, staff, and friends. In the few moments that follow I would like to reflect on some of the important issues that face you in the move from this environment of a small woman's liberal arts college with a religious tradition into a contemporary world. Those of you who are graduating from the weekend College or from Continuing Education have already experienced this movement, whereas those who have attended Notre Dame as full-time boarding students will soon experience it for the first time. Society today is full of forces that lead to fragmentation, loss of personal identity, and lack of fulfilling life within community. It is important, then, to learn how to become differentiated as an individual and how to seek, to find, and to build your own specific form of community. In this context, it might be helpful to consider the College of Notre Dame in three of its functions. If we personify the College, it is possible to understand her as a woman who has related to you as Mother, as Complement, and as Friend.

Notre Dame has been a mother to you in many ways these past years. She has provided a nurturing environment full of the lovely gifts of nature with her stately trees and spacious lawns. She has shared with you her wisdom as well as, in some precious moments, her love of wisdom. Through the opportunity to study the liberal arts she has allowed you the time and resources to continue the life-long task of understanding the mysteries of the universe. Through the opportunity to study science she has given you tools to penetrate the deepest

secrets hidden in the matter of life. Through the opportunity to take part in internships she has helped you to learn how to concretize theoretical knowledge so that you will be of use to others in the world. Finally, through her religious heritage she has communicated to you that ultimate questions in life are questions of values.

In an increasingly secular world, the value of such 'mothering' can not be underestimated. It is incumbent upon you as alumnae to do all that you can to defend the College of Notre Dame, especially in her identity as a small liberal arts college. As more and more institutions of higher learning grow to the point where personal student-teacher relationships are no longer possible, the need to preserve small, intimate learning environments is very great. As other institutions follow lucrative financial programs which assume a preference for technology and its subsequent dominance of human thought, the need for liberal arts colleges increases. There must be colleges where students can learn in a personal way the bases upon which ethical decisions and value judgments can be made. These colleges must have intimacy and a proper environment for reflective thinking. Notre Dame has offered this opportunity to you. With your help it will continue to do so for years to come.

In addition to Notre Dame having served as a 'mother' to you, she can also be understood in her function as a complement to other kinds of colleges and universities. By virtue of being traditionally a 'woman's college', Notre Dame represents woman in relation to other institutions of higher learning which predominantly represent the values of man. It can be asked: What does it mean today to retain an identity as a woman's college in a society which is increasingly moving toward an abolition of the sex distinction? Similarly, it can be asked what does it mean to be a woman or a man today when the bases for sexual differentiation are becoming increasingly blurred? Not too long ago it was believed that

the best thing that could be given to women was the opportunity to attend colleges which were either predominantly filled with male students or at least had an equal balance of male and female students. Now, however, this belief has been reconsidered. Several studies have demonstrated that women who graduate from women's colleges are proportionately more successful in life, have a much higher sense of self-esteem, and more frequently assume leadership positions in society afterwards than women who attend colleges which are more representative of the values of men. In attempting to discover reasons for these facts, it has been suggested that the presence of a large number of positive role models of women teachers and staff, coupled with the opportunity for students to practice leadership roles in women's colleges and to speak out in class, contributes to developing a strong sense of female identity in women students present in these colleges. On the other hand, women in institutions largely dominated by men frequently become shy and even perhaps insecure in their self-development. It would seem, then, that there is a tremendous value in the continuation of women's colleges, particularly at the present time when so many women are struggling to find a solid sense of their own female identity. It is precisely when women are comfortable with themselves and with their capacities that they can become equal complements to men and to society at large. Similarly, the College of Notre Dame, as a self-confident woman's college, can represent the values of women's education in the society at large.

In a specific way, today offers a new, important challenge to women's colleges. With the exciting development of Women's Studies in nearly every field of research, an enormous amount of previously hidden knowledge has become available to women, knowledge about our history, our present situation, and our capacities for creativity and even genius. When an institution of higher learning brings

this knowledge to its women and men students, it renders a tremendous service to humanity at large. Women become able to develop an intellectual framework within which to ground their conscious identity. Men students learn how to admire and understand woman's situation in the western world. Within this framework the complementary relation between the sexes is able to flower in a field of equality and mutual respect.

Therefore, it is important to recognize that the continuation of an identity as a woman's college in no way precludes the presence of male students. On the contrary, I suspect that men who attend women's colleges will come away with a deep sense of appreciation for the talents and gifts of women. Similarly, women students are helped by the insights and presence of men. The College of Notre Dame can be both a women's college and a place where men are welcome to share its many gifts. In fact, to be strong in one's own identity at the same time as being open to those who complement us is one goal of the mature human life.

If we now look at the College of Notre Dame in her third function as friend, it is helpful to think about the fact that a friend is a witness to the future as well as a residue from the past. A friend ought to challenge us to grow, to change, and to open ourselves to new possibilities in life. Notre Dame, by her own example, has demonstrated its capacity to change in order to be able to better respond to the challenges of the contemporary world. Specifically, when the college was founded in 1864 it was created with a carefully defined purpose. At the first commencement, Charles Bonaparte stated in his address: "Here, for the first time in America, a Catholic college for the education of young ladies bestows the Bachelor's degree." This fact has a particular significance for me because the first teaching job I was given after graduation, offered

to me by the Sisters of Notre Dame of Montreal, was to teach within a small Catholic college called "Marianopolis." The Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal was one of the first to confer Bachelor's degrees on French women in North America. These two colleges in Montreal and Baltimore were created to be parochial in the sense that they served a specific religious population of a particular age and sex. Today, however, needs are different, and the movement from a closed to an open institution is a wonderful part of the contemporary desire to share with and learn from people of all backgrounds. Notre Dame has opened herself to men and women of all ages and all religious faiths, although it states that its roots lie firmly planted in the soil of the Jewish and Christian traditions. It is in this context that the challenges of the future need to be set down.

As anyone who has experienced a close friendship knows, when the circle of friends opens, there is a need to counterbalance this opening with a deepening of the roots of the original relationship. With this in mind, then, it can be asked: "How can Notre Dame remain true to her heritage while at the same time remaining vitally connected with the openness of the contemporary world? So far, its identity as a liberal arts institution as well as a woman's college has been considered. What then of its religious dimension? In a world that is becoming increasingly secular, it is important to think about how Notre Dame can be true to itself at the same time as it is consistent with American expectations about an institution of higher learning. With this task in mind, I would like to suggest that it is an important obligation of a college with a religious heritage to bring this heritage forward in the academic area with the highest degree of excellence. This means the college should teach the intellectual frameworks within which the great religious thinkers of the past have functioned. It is important to distinguish religious practices from the significant thought of

religious intellectuals. It is the thought content that should be taught within a university setting. Students should be able to come to a college with a religious heritage and study such people as St. Augustine, St. Thomas, Maimonides, or Martin Buber. A student at a woman's college with this heritage should be able to study such important women religious writers as St. Theresa, Julian of Norwich, Ann Frank, Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Sigrid Undset, and Flannery O'Connor. Each writer should be studied and criticized within his or her own proper field of contribution alongside of the hundreds of important secular thinkers who are already studied in various courses. In this way, the students can be provided the opportunity to learn about the best of the religious tradition. If they can not find this in colleges with a religious heritage, then where will they? The College of Notre Dame has already begun to meet this objective. It can also be a witness in the future to this aspect of friendship to its students and to society at large. Specifically, it can offer the best of what it has to give. Friendship is nourished by the continual offering of what is best.

On the other hand, you can be a friend to Notre Dame by fully accepting the responsibilities and challenges of the future. After Notre Dame has released you into the world by conferring upon you an academic degree, some of you will continue in further study and specialization, others of you will be entering into a job, and still others will be working through a commitment to responsibilities to your home and friends. Each one of you will have a unique way in which you can bring the spirit of Notre Dame into your environment.

It is important to recognize that you are dependent on others in this future. Each one of you who is graduating here today has not achieved this important goal by yourself. Someone has sacrificed to bring this moment to completion. Perhaps it has been your parents, perhaps your children, perhaps

your spouse, and certainly your friends. In addition, the faculty and staff have given hours of preparation and service to you on this campus. In this way your commencement is their commencement as well. It is, therefore, in and through a kind of community that you are here to receive your degree.

In the future you will be seeking out new forms of community to replace the one you are now leaving. You must try to find the right combination of people to help you to live a life of value and contribution. For it is in and through community that we are able to be individuals, and it is as mature individuals that we become able to be part of productive communities. It is also important to recognize that ultimately fruitful communities are grounded in the soil of a common set of beliefs which recognize the full worth of persons. Notre Dame has given you a beginning in this direction. It is up to you, now, to continue to carry out the bonds of this legacy of friendship.

Today we have considered Notre Dame as personified in mother, complement, and friend. Tomorrow is Pentecost. This religious festival brings to mind a specific formation of community. Abraham was called to leave Egypt and go into the desert to form a new community. Moses was called into the desert to form another new community. Mary, as Notre Dame, was called into the room at Pentecost to take part in the formation of still another form of community. It is useful to reflect on the fact that Abraham was not alone in his venture, but was guided by three angels; Moses was guided by a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire; and Mary was guided by the fire and wind of the Holy Spirit. As each of you move in 1980 from your commencement, be confident that you will not be alone. In your search for individuality and community you will be supported by the same powerful force which has given you life from your very first commencement.

God bless you all!

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